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Toxic Runoff

The peninsula's cities are pumping poisons into Monterey Bay. And they can't afford to stop.



-Jane Morba

It started with a rash on Easter Sunday—a violent splash of itchy red across my hips and butt. I applied some hydrocortisone, absentmindedly chalked it up to either holiday stress or a recent switch in laundry detergents, and surfed the very next day.

It had been raining for weeks, but the winds were offshore and the North Pacific was serving up a steady pulse of good waves. As usual, I surfed at Asilomar State Beach or in Spanish Bay, and I wasn't alone. There were always a few other surfers in the water—sometimes as many as eight or 10.

We knew the water wasn't clean. There were no signs posted warning of bacterial contamination, but surfers grasp the principles of urban runoff better than most. We see it firsthand. At times, we wallow in it.

This spring was one of the wettest seasons in memory. Stormwater runoff poured into the ocean around the Monterey Peninsula—a murky discharge that drained down our streets and raccoon-infested sewer pipes like 10,000 tiny waterpark flume rides carrying a host of bacteria, pathogens and dangerous metals. After a few weeks of the deluge, I figured most of the truly dangerous crap had been flushed out into the deep submarine canyons that ring our coastline. I was wrong.

I guess you have to be a surfer to understand why anyone would risk exposure to the toxic cocktail the California coastline sloughs off during and after every rain; or, for that matter, why urban runoff frustrates and angers us so much. Imagine if the community periodically pumped sewage into

your bathtub, gym or church. (Of course, surfers flush their toilets the same as everyone else. Like all environmental issues, we're in this together.)

Over the years I'd dealt with some ear infections, a sore throat and the runs. Never anything too serious. Whenever I surfed during or after a rainstorm I swabbed my ears with alcohol and took a long shower immediately afterward.

In the weeks following Easter I started getting really sick.

First it was a week of terrible stomach cramps, then a sudden 103-degree fever. When my tonsils became infected and swollen, my doctor started getting nervous. The antibiotics were ineffective. Weeks had passed and I was no better. She began to suspect a virus or worse.

She sent me to a hematologist for a comprehensive battery of blood tests. "He's also an oncologist," she told me. "But don't worry about that."

I worried. The hematologist told me my white blood cells were dropping off precipitously. Normally, our blood carries be-

tween 5,000 and 10,000 white blood cells per microliter. Over the course of the next few days I went from 2,000 to 1,400 to 400.

Something was wiping out my whites in a hurry. Without them, I had no immune system. The hematologist ordered an immediate bone marrow exam. My hematologist was prepared to become my oncologist.

A bone marrow exam is a profound experience. Basically they drive a long needle into your pelvic bone and take a sample from your very core. It's a trip to feel the metal spike pierce your bone and suck out virgin marrow. And yeah, it hurts like hell.

Two days later, my doctor sat me down and told me they didn't find anything. I didn't have cancer and my white blood cell count was rebounding. He shrugged his shoulders and told me it was just "one of these things"—an unidentifiable virus. "We'll never know what it is," he told me truthfully. "That's just the way these things are sometimes."

MAKING A BAD SITUATION WORSE

OK, so he got sick, he's blaming it on the water and now he's writing a big story about it. Yeah, pretty much.

For me, the issue of clean water hit a crisis level in 2006. But I'm just an indicator of what's to come. Think of me and surfers like me as canaries of the coastline. We're in the water almost every day, and a lot of us are getting sick.

The Monterey region has a projected 20.7 percent growth rate in this decade alone. State-

wide, California's projected growth rate is 24 percent through the year 2020. As developers corset California's gorgeous curves in ever more pavement and asphalt, the land continues to lose her ability to absorb and filter water. Polluted stormwater, and dry weather runoff from excess watering of lawns and other water uses, is the number-one source of pollution in California's coastal waters.

In urban areas where streets and parking lots have replaced fields and woods that absorb rainwater, all of this runoff heads straight into the nearest natural watercourse and then straight toward the ocean. And the more we pave, the more we pollute.

"This is an area of environmental protection that's rife for improvements and inventions," says Mark Massara, director of the Sierra Club's California Coastal Campaign. "But the reality is there's simply no substitute for open habitat. Open space is the best method of water filtration."

Ironically, the Monterey Peninsula's magnificent geography is a worst-case scenario for stormwater management. Like most of the region west of the San Andreas Fault, the Peninsula is underlain by Late Cretaceous (65- to 100-million-year-old) granite. Unlike Fort Ord, which has become a textbook example of stormwater retention because of its deep, cleansing sand, cities like Pacific Grove are facing distinctive storage problems.

"We have some unique problems that other jurisdictions don't have," says Pacific Grove City

Manager Jim Colangelo. "We're built out so we don't have places where we can store rainwater while we treat it and we're on granite so we can't pump it into the sand and just hold it there for a while."

As a result, stormwater runs unimpeded off the crown of pavement, asphalt and granite and into the surrounding ocean.

There is one way that geography benefits public health. The only reason we don't see a lot more cases of bacterial illness here in Monterey County is that the water's too cold for most recreational swimmers—the deep submarine canyon off our coastline generates the most consistently frigid temperatures in the state.

As proof, the Monterey County Health Department has recorded zero complaints of illness from beach contamination in 2005-06, while the local Surfrider Foundation has recorded eight calls from sick surfers this year—most of whom were surfing at Asilomar. In addition there have been reports of staph infections and worse from the boys over in Moss Landing. And this is only the tip of the iceberg. Surfers are a notoriously tight-lipped and recalcitrant crew. Most aren't even going to admit they've gotten sick.

Yet down south, where the water's warmer, people are getting sick. A lot of people.

THE REAL ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS

In a study published in the journal *Environmental Science and Technology* last month it was

reported that as many as 1.5 million people are sickened by bacterial pollution on Southern California beaches each year. Granted, the Monterey Peninsula is much cleaner than Santa Monica Bay, but it's not clean.

"We may not be better than anyone else, but certainly not worse," says Susan Rimando, the county's supervising environmental health specialist.

Yet this is not simply a health issue. The Central Coast has the fastest growing ocean economy in California, one that already generates nearly \$6 billion annually. The Monterey region alone has a \$1.8 billion coastal economy. Clean beaches are vital to a robust tourist economy.

"People are perceiving that it's unhealthy to go to the beach," says Anjali Jaiswal, staff attorney with the NRDC. "Clean water equals a healthy economy."

Urban runoff is the number one issue concerning Friends of the Sea Otter, according to Executive Director D'Anne Albers. Pollutants attributed to urban runoff are responsible for 60 percent of sea otter deaths.

In recent years, sea otters have been showing a marked decline. This had biologists mystified. As it turns out, our furry, endangered tourist magnets are being killed by biological pathogens, most notably from cat and raccoon feces.

Urban runoff washes the deadly parasites in domestic and feral cat feces into the ocean where it's filtered through the muscles of shellfish and ingested by sea otters. The problem is exacerbated by a large outdoor cat population and the improper dis-

posal of cat litter. During the dry season, Monterey's and Pacific Grove's sewer systems are raccoon dens. The excrement builds up over the months and then gets washed out en masse with the first rains.

In addition, a tablespoon of motor oil can ruin a sea otter's ability to stay warm and poison its food, while heavy metals, fertilizers and pesticides severely weaken the otters' systems.

And healthcare costs for those 1.5 million people sickened by bacterial pollution in Southern California? They range from an estimated \$21 million to \$414 million annually, depending on the method of reporting used, researchers found. Those estimates include direct losses, such as missed work, medical treatment costs and doctor visits.

Incidentally, my illness has cost me, Blue Cross and the *Weekly* nearly \$8,000.

POLITICS RUNS DOWNHILL

Thing is, urban runoff on the Monterey Peninsula is not some new issue. In fact, it's been exhaustively studied. Earlier this year the Natural Resources Defense Council and The Ocean Conservancy co-published an 89-page document entitled "A Practical Plan for Pollution Prevention: Urban Runoff Solutions for the Monterey Region," which more or less sums up the problem and presents solutions and minimum control measures.

The real conflict appears to lie in regulation.

Like the stormwater itself, responsibility for urban runoff cur-

rently flows downhill from the feds and through the state before pouring onto the disgruntled heads of our cities.

"We're next to the bottom if not the bottom of the regulatory food chain," says Monterey City Manager Fred Meurer. "No one wants to deal with it. It's always someone else's problem. We just happen to be at the end of the regulating chain so it's our problem. That's what irritates me. "I don't own [the waste]. I just own the pipe it runs through."

The regulatory environment is almost as complex as the natural one.

In 1987, Congress amended the Clean Water Act with a phased schedule for implementing stormwater permitting requirements across the nation. The amendment required Phase 1 cities, which operate a "separate storm sewer system" and have a population over 100,000, to apply for a discharge permit. Mid-sized Phase 2 cities, like Monterey, were simply required to create stormwater plans.

In 2003, the State Water Resources Control Board developed a statewide ("General") permit for Phase 2 cities requiring them to comply with the state's Stormwater Management Plan.

To further complicate matters, there are 34 Areas of Special Biological Significance (ASBS) along the California coast that the State Water Board has officially designated as having "unique biological value and/or fragility." We are blessed to have three of them on the Monterey Peninsula—Carmel Bay, the Pacific Grove Marine Gardens Fish Ref-

uge, and the Hopkins Marine Refuge.

Two years ago, the State Water Board, per the requirements of the California Ocean Plan, threw down the gauntlet. The State notified the cities of Monterey, Pacific Grove and Carmel, and the Pebble Beach Company, to cease stormwater and nonpoint source water discharges into the ASBS within their city limits, or to request an exception.

For the last two years, the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board and the local municipalities have, according to [the] NRDC/Ocean Conservancy report, “failed to adopt the kinds of swift and effective cleanup practices that are commonplace elsewhere in California, and urban runoff continues to flow into these three ASBS.”

WILL VOTERS PAY FOR CLEAN OCEANS?

One of the central purposes stated in the “Urban Runoff Solutions for the Monterey Region” report was to demonstrate that the current draft Monterey proposal was not up to snuff. The report proved this with a comparison to other stormwater management plans for similarly-sized municipalities.

Monterey City Manager Fred Meurer says he has no choice but to drag his feet on the issue because of budget restrictions.

“When the state makes me do it, then we’ll really find out how important it is, because I’ll put in an unfunded state mandate,” a formal request for financial aid to fulfill the requirements of a state regulation.

“They will either reimburse us for doing it or we’ll stop doing it,” he says. “How do I come up with the money to do it? If it’s a state mandate like ASBS I’m going to say no and make them *make* me do it so I have at least a half a chance at reimbursement.”

Angeli Jaiswal isn’t buying it. She says that cities across the US “similar in size to Monterey but significantly poorer” manage to adhere to the guidelines of the Clean Water Act without going bankrupt.

“Proven, cost-effective practices can be used successfully to control stormwater pollution,” says Jaiswal, who is also one of two authors credited with preparing the “Urban Runoff Solutions” report.

“Phase 2 areas, like those along the Central Coast, should learn from the good and bad experiences of the Phase 1 areas. Among the most effective measures that could be adopted are the implementation of common-sense practices to stop pollution from construction and industrial sites, and the establishment of design standards that protect water quality.”

Meurer contends that state waters are the state’s responsibility. As proof he points to a 2003 lawsuit that ruled that the city of Monterey could not regulate kelp harvesting in state waters. “Yet when it comes time to determine the health of the [kelp] forest, that’s our problem,” Meurer says.

Ultimately, Meurer contends, it comes down to money.

“I don’t know how I’m going to pay for some of this,” he says plainly. “There are going to be

trade-offs. If the monitoring is not required by law I’m not going to volunteer to do it.”

Meurer recounts his shock when one of the regional water quality control board members suggested raising the hotel tax to pay for an effective stormwater management plan.

“He obviously has no idea how the finance works in the state of California,” Meurer says. “The people of California have said, ‘We don’t want to be taxed and it’s going to take two-thirds of us to say yes if we’re going to be taxed.’”

It’s a topic that deeply frustrates Monterey’s city manager. Meurer believes the single biggest threat to the future of Monterey is “the general unwillingness of today’s voting population to invest in the future, as our parents and grandparents invested in our future.”

“We don’t want to pay taxes and we’ve created this framework of public decision-making that makes it almost impossible to pass a revenue piece until you’ve gotten to the crisis level,” he says. “City managers are supposed to make sure you never get to the crisis level.”

US Rep. Sam Farr has been on the forefront of the nation’s ocean politics for more than a decade. He agrees that the heart of the problem lies in the fact that it has become increasingly difficult to pass revenue issues on the ballot, especially in Monterey County. He points to the recent defeats to bond measures which would have provided funding for Monterey schools, the embattled Natividad Center (“great plan, got 65 per-

cent, missed by one percent”) and county roads and transportation projects.

“I think American society has forgotten that the price you pay for civilization is taxes,” he says.

Farr also says the government’s ability to address issues like urban runoff is crippled by America’s dire financial situation. As a member of the Appropriations Committee in Washington, Farr helps authorize all new federal expenditures. He points out that the administration in Washington has been cutting the revenue for the federal government not by the millions and billions of dollars but by the trillions.

Meanwhile, he says that the country pays for its wars with a credit card. It all inspires little hope for clean-water politics.

A CHALLENGE ON THE HORIZON

On Aug. 15, the State Water Board will hold public scoping meetings at the Monterey Conference Center to address stormwater and nonpoint source discharges into the ASBSs.

The Monterey region’s cities seem willing to work together on the issue. Just last week, the NRDC reported some headway in formulating a plan to significantly improve the previous stormwater management program with all of the Monterey Peninsula municipalities (except Carmel and the Pebble Beach Company).

“NRDC is encouraged by the commitment to water quality protection shown by the group,” Jaiswal says. “We hope that they

continue their commitment by showing the same leadership in protecting ASBSs. We also hope that Carmel-by-the-Sea and Pebble Beach follow in their footsteps.”

As for me, I was back in the water surfing less than a week after my white blood cells came back to normal. Last weekend, I was pushing my 3-year-old son into waves at Asilomar on his Spongebob Squarepants boogie board.

As far as I’m concerned, and I think I speak for all neoprene-clad canaries catching waves in Monterey County, there’s too much at stake not to find solutions and funding to implement those solutions when it comes to clean water. Farr would love to see more agreement like ours.

“What can we find unanimous consent on as a community? Is it the oceans?” he asks. “I’d love to know, because I’m trying to get as much damn money as I can to solve all these problems.”